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ABSTRACT

The growing movement for teaching about religion in the public schools, as distinguished from religious instruction or devotional exercises, reflects widespread concern regarding the phenomenon of religious illiteracy and the lack of knowledge or understanding of the significant role played by religion in U.S. life, past and present, and in world history generally. Such teaching, recognized as constitutional and in accord with separation of church and state, acknowledges the formative influence of religions in culture. A principal concern of those who would implement such programs is how to deal fairly with the religious and cultural diversity of U.S. life without fostering indifference to questions of truth and related values. Some who oppose teaching about religions believe its effect might be to further relativism. One approach distinguishes pluralism from relativism by defining the first as a way of living with authentic differences that can coexist in the body politic when it is informed by freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and traditions of civility. Teaching about religions, as distinguished from values education, civil religion, and similar movements, is intended to be disinterested, comprehensive, and sensitive to the complexities of faith, careful to avoid even the appearance of advocacy in belief or practice. Defining religion for teaching programs presents another difficulty, requiring that students discriminate between narrow and broad categories and that teachers avoid both religious and secularist bias. A descriptive approach can help students perceive the relationship between religion and culture by examining world faiths. The report lists proposed general goals for such programs, typical problems that hinder their implementation, and guidelines for attaining them. Finally, specific curricular materials and programs are cited as exemplary models for emulation and further development. (DB)

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Religion in the Public Schools: Pluralism and Teaching About Religions

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February 15, 1989

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RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PLURALISM AND TEACHING ABOUT RELIGIONS

SUMMARY

The growing movement for teaching *about* religion in the public schools, as distinguished from religious instruction or devotional exercise, reflects widespread concern regarding the phenomenon of religious illiteracy, the lack of knowledge or understanding of the significant role played by religion in American life, past and present, and in world history generally. Such teaching, recognized as constitutional and in accord with separation of church and state, acknowledges the formative influence of religions in culture.

A principal concern of those who would implement such programs is how to deal fairly with the religious and cultural diversity of American life without fostering indifference to questions of truth and related values. Some who oppose teaching about religions believe its effect might be to further relativism. One approach distinguishes pluralism from relativism by defining the first as a way of living with authentic differences that can coexist in the body politic when it is informed by freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and traditions of civility. Teaching about religions, as distinguished from values education, civil religion, and similar movements, is intended to be disinterested, comprehensive, and sensitive to the complexities of faith, careful to avoid even the appearance of advocacy in belief or practice.

Defining religion for teaching programs presents another difficulty, requiring that students discriminate between narrow and broad categories and that teachers avoid both religious and secularist bias. A descriptive approach can help students perceive the relationship between religion and culture by examining historic world faiths.

The report notes proposed general goals for such programs, typical problems that often block their implementation, and guidelines for attaining them, emphasizing broadly representative consultation in the local community. Finally, specific curricular materials and programs are cited as exemplary models for emulation and further development.

RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: PLURALISM AND TEACHING ABOUT RELIGIONS

I. BACKGROUND

In recent decades, and especially since the School Prayer decisions of the Supreme Court in 1962 and 1963,[1] there has been growing support for teaching religion in the public schools – that is, teaching *about* religions, as distinguished from the teaching *of* religion or religious instruction. In part, the movement for teaching about religions represents an extension of existing and often longstanding programs at the college and university levels. In a larger context, this movement reflects increasing concern among educators and the general public alike regarding what is commonly perceived as widespread religious illiteracy, the lack of adequate knowledge or understanding of the significant role played by religion in American as well as world history and in public life today. Some who support the study of religions in the public school, emphasizing the pluralistic nature of America's religious traditions, contend that teaching about religions will strengthen the body politic by clarifying those values and ideals that are held in common by citizens of differing faiths – values and ideals often said to constitute the American civic, civil, or cultural religion. Others, noting the impact of religion through the ages in social studies, the humanities, and the fine arts, argue that teaching about religions will both broaden and deepen citizen understanding and thereby further the shaping of public policy, beyond narrowly conceived issues of power politics. Such teaching, they assert, will also enhance mutual respect and goodwill among the various religious communities, thus helping to diminish religious prejudice that may derive from ignorance or distorted perception of beliefs held by others.

Scholars have noted that the Supreme Court in the McCollum decision of 1948 and the Schempp-Murray decisions of 1963, did not prohibit and,

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[1] For discussions of these cases in their historical context, see: Stokes, Anson P., and Leo Pfeffer. *Church and State in the United States*. New York, Harper & Row, 1964. p. 142-147, 371-382. See also: Morgan, Richard E. *The Supreme Court & Religion*. New York, Free Press, 1972. p. 123-134.

indeed, supported teaching *about* religion in the public schools.[2] What the Court disallowed was school-sponsored religious instruction and devotional exercises. A clear distinction was made between the teaching of religion as prescriptive for belief or practice, which was ruled unconstitutional, and teaching *about* religion as descriptive study of a vital element in human experience, which was held to be congruent with the First Amendment and separation of church and state.[3] The essential argument for teaching about religions was stated in 1964 by the American Association of School Administrators.[4]

> A curriculum which ignored religion would itself have serious religious implications. It would seem to proclaim that religion has not been as real in men's lives as health or politics or economics. By omission it would appear to deny that religion has been and is important in man's history--a denial of the obvious. In day-by-day practice, the topic cannot be avoided. As an integral part of man's culture, it must be included.

One scholar has proposed a set of "pair words" to further refine this basic distinction between the academic study of religions and proselytism, the propagation or practice of a particular faith.[5] The terms themselves convey an inherent polarity in their divergent approach to the place of religion in the public schools: study as against practice, expose as against impose, instruction as against indoctrination, educate as against convert, academic as against devotional, study as opposed to teach, awareness as opposed to acceptance, and inform as opposed to conform. The pairing suggests ideal constructs of clearly understood terms, whereas in the actual complexities of the learning experience there are likely to be unavoidable tensions and ambiguities of the kind indicated by the historian Arnold S. Nash's criticism of the "implicit assumption that the rationalist can transcend all bias and achieve an impartial perspective." That impartial perspective in the presentation of the major religious traditions in American society requires a neutrality

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[2] See: Katz, Wilbur G. Religious Studies in State Universities: The New Legal Climate. In McLean, Milton D., ed. *Religious Studies in Public Universities*. Carbondale, Illinois, Southern Illinois University-Central Publications, 1967. p. 15-21. See also: Pfeffer, Leo. *Church, State, & Freedom*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1967. p. 410.

[3] See: Stokes, *Church and State*, p. 358-361.

[4] See: Kniker, Charles R. *Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools*. Bloomington, Indiana, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1985. p. 14.

[5] Piediscalzi, Nicholas, and William E. Collie, editors. *Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools*. Niles, Illinois, Argus Communications, 1977. p. 15.

characterized by respectful encounter with communities of faith and not, in Justice Goldberg's words, "a brooding and pervasive devotion to the secular and a passive, or even active, hostility to the religious...."[6] If the hidden bias in academic detachment is to be overcome without yielding to sectarian or ideological indoctrination, effective teaching about religions will require teachers who are informed, disinterested and sensitive, together with resource materials that are accurate and fair. A wealth of practical experience already exists that can provide instructive examples and models for emulation and expansion in public school programs.

The principal challenge confronting the movement for teaching about religions in the public school centers in the complex reality of American pluralism--given the religious and cultural diversity of American life, how can teaching about religions in a pluralistic context avoid an essentially value-neutral objectivity that fosters indifferentism? Some are concerned that "objectivity" may encourage the homogenization of genuine differences in the spirit of Gibbon's famous words:[7]

> The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful.

Critics of teaching about religion say that the very ideal of objectivity, equal treatment for all and advocacy of none, may convey a value-free relativism in which all religions are seen as valid but none as true. Others perceive in any "common denominator" approach to religions and their distinctive claims an implicit ideological valuation, whether it be some form of what is called secular humanism or a modern-day version of American civic or civil religion having its roots in a historically Protestant tradition of national civic piety.[8] These and similar concerns highlight the need to define pluralism in teaching about religions as a way of understanding and of living

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[6] Cited in: *The Practical Cogitator*. Edited by C.P. Curtis and Ferris Greenslet. 3rd Edition, revised and enlarged. New York, Dell Publishing-Laurel Edition, 1975. p. 133-134. For Justice Goldberg, see: Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 306 (1963).

[7] Cited in: Bartlett, John. *Familiar Quotations*. 14th Edition. Boston, Little, Brown & Company, 1968. p. 465.

[8] For differing views of pluralism, see: *Religion, Morality, and the Law*. Edited by J. Rowland Pennock and John W. Chapman. New York, New York University Press, 1988. p. 277-279; *Religion and Morality in American Schooling*. Edited by Thomas C. Hunt and Marilyn M. Maxson. Washington, University Press of America, 1981. p. 165-177; and *Religious Pluralism and Religious Education*. Edited by Norma H. Thompson. Birmingham, Alabama, Religious Education Press, 1988. p. 7-36.

with authentic deep-seated differences that can coexist in their respective identities within the constitutional framework of religious liberty and freedom of conscience, subject only to the necessities of public order.[9] Such an approach to the evident and growing religious pluralism of American society would clearly distinguish any form of indoctrination, subtle or overt, from the religious awareness and knowledge integral to the study of religions in an academic setting.

This report examines the character of American pluralism, the civic or civil religious tradition, the meaning of religion as the word is often used, the historic background to the movement to teach about religions in the public schools, proposed guidelines and goals for such programs, and some difficulties that often prevent their implementation.

II. PLURALISM, CIVIC RELIGION AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Pluralism--that is, the flourishing of a multiplicity of religious groups--has been called "the predominant theme of the sociology of religion in the United States."[10] It has been characteristic of American religious life from colonial times and is believed to have been a significant factor in the growth and acceptance of toleration. Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, the "common faith" of the American consensus was a form of Protestant Christianity whose values were generally accepted.

Today there are over 220 denominations in the United States, going beyond Protestantism and the Judeo-Christian tradition itself to include Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and other faiths. There are also many who reject traditional religions.[11] Any program designed to teach about religions in public schools must recognize the pluralism of our culture and its consequences, positive and negative.

The positive element in pluralism is its historic association with religious liberty and freedom of conscience, whether as cause or result. "The principle of religious freedom," write Roof and McKinney, "is implicit in the notion of

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[9] See: Weigel, George. Achieving Disagreement: From Indifference to Pluralism. *This World*, No. 24, Winter 1989. p. 54-63.

[10] Ladd, John. Politics and Religion in America: The Enigma of Pluralism. In *Religion, Morality, and the Law*, p. 266.

[11] See: *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.* Edited by Constant H. Jacquet. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1988. p. 258.

denominationalism,"[12] together with the idea of individual civil liberties. No single religious group has been able to dominate American society.

At the same time, pluralism has been increasingly bound up with the forces of modernity that further individualism in American life and undermine the role of traditional institutions. Many sociologists of religion have argued that societies need common values to legitimate the social order and to nurture civic or public virtue.[13] Pluralism, increasingly associated with the steady secularization of American life, has contributed inadvertently to the sense of uncontrolled drift in values and morality that many observers have perceived. American civil religion--in Herberg's words, "the Puritan way, secularized; and the Revivalist way, secularized"[14]--provided a source for meaning in the national life that all, believers and non-believers, could share.

The removal of prayer and Bible reading from the public schools in the 1960s was seen by many as perceived deprivation,[15] undermining both the patriotic and the religious elements in civil religion. Evidence for secularization-by-omission has been provided in recent studies of public school textbooks documenting the virtual exclusion of American religious life and traditional values from the treatment of history and social studies. Paul C. Vitz, whose work has received wide attention, has noted the omission in all texts studied of the significant role played by religions in American history and in contemporary life. In addition, the late 19th century emphasis on "character education" that followed the weakening of the traditional Protestant ethic in the public schools "represented the response of the state...to the declining status and power of the church and the family."[16] The ideals of the good *person* yielded to those of the good *citizen* in the context of state-sanctioned values, secularized, utilitarian, and relativistic.

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[12] Roof, Wade Clark, and William McKinney. *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future.* New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1988. p. 188.

[13] See: *American Civil Religion.* Edited by Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones. New York, Harper & Row, 1974; and *Pushing the Faith: Proselytism and Civility in a Pluralistic World.* Edited by Martin Marty and Frederick Greenspahn. New York, Crossroad, 1988. p. 3-24 and 155-163.

[14] Herberg in *American Civil Religion*, p. 83.

[15] Collie, William. In *Religion and Morality in American Schooling*, p. 275. See also: Vitz, Paul C. *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Children's Textbooks.* Ann Arbor, Servant, 1986.

[16] Yulish, Stephen M. *The Search for a Civic Religion: A History of the Character Education Movement in America, 1890-1935.* Washington, University Press of America, 1980. p. 255.

This process, together with the perceived resurgence of religious activism in the last decade,[17] has given fresh impetus to the movement for teaching about religions in the public schools, in order to provide students with a more adequate understanding not only of the humanities and social sciences but particularly of the American experience and its meaning. Proponents for the academic study of religion in public schools generally distinguish such "objective" study, whose goal is religious literacy, from "contemporary popular forms of moral education and value clarification"[18] whose focus is the process of ethical commitment and moral decision-making. Others, including some who oppose such programs, are concerned that the distinction between the two may be blurred. In studying religions, the emphasis is on integrative views of human life, its purpose, significance, and context, as the foundation and ground for ethics and values. Academic study of religions should therefore be distinguished from the inculcation of "civic" or "civil religious" ideals and values, the "common faith" of popular American religiosity, even though social education will inevitably include study of religions as well as of secular values. The two realms, though distinguished for analysis, cannot be wholly insulated from one another in reality. What must be avoided is the entanglement of religion or ideology with the state through the appearance of advocacy in belief or practice.

III. DEFINING RELIGION

A recurring problem in discussions on teaching religions in the schools is the quest for an adequate, comprehensive, and practical definition of religion.

Two kinds of definitions are commonly given, classified by some scholars as "narrow" and "broad," and reflecting the diversity that is now encompassed by the word religion. "Narrow" in this context alludes to any specific "institutionalized set of beliefs, dogmas, ethical prescriptions, and cultic practices" centered in devotion to and service of a particular deity or deities.[19]

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[17] See: Hertzke, Allen D. *Representing God in Washington*. Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1988. p. 20-43; and *The Political Role of Religion in the United States*. Edited by Stephen D. Johnson and Joseph B. Tamner. Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1986.

[18] Piediscalzi and Collie, *Teaching about Religion* p. 20. See also: Haynes, Charles C. Religious Literacy in the Social Studies. *Social Education*, November-December 1987. p. 488-490.

[19] Piediscalzi and Collie, *Teaching About Religion*, p. 17.

This and similar definitions (such as that proposed by Peter Slater:[20] "a personal way of life informed by traditional elements of creed, code, and cult, and directed towards the realization of some transcendent end-state") embrace the historic religious communities, and so facilitate the study of religions in terms of the history of creedal formation and the comparative study of code and cult. Among important contemporary sociologists of religion and philosophers, Leszek Kolakowski[21] writes of religion as:

> ...the realm of worship wherein understanding, knowledge, the feeling of participation in the ultimate reality (whether or not a personal god is meant) and moral commitment appear as a single act.

Similarly, Clifford Geertz[22] describes religion as:

> a system of symbols. . .formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

All such definitions are concerned both with the temporal dimensions of historic religions in legitimizing the social order and with the trans-temporal dimension of transcendence that distinguishes religion from secular ideologies clothed in religious rhetoric or imagery.

"Broad" definitions tend to define religion as any faith or set of values to which an individual or group give ultimate loyalty," including such disparate "faiths" as "Theravada Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secularism, Humanism, Scientism, Nationalism, and the attainment of money and/or power."[23] One scholar, proposing a "humanistic definition of religion" in a "secularized, pluralistic" context, has suggested that "religion is one way humans relate to the past" through "an authoritative source or canon" that legitimizes a tradition. By this definition, he argues, Marxism and

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[20] Welch, Claude. *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum: An Analysis and Interpretation*. Washington, Association of American Colleges, 1972. p. 29.

[21] Kolakowski, Leszek. *Religion*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1982. p. 191.

[22] Geertz, Clifford. Religion as a Cultural System. In *The Religious Situation*. Edited by Donald Cutler. Boston, Beacon Press, 1968. p. 643.

[23] Piediscalzi and Collie, *Teaching About Religion*, p. 17.

Freudianism are therefore religions in the same way Hinduism is a religion.[24] Others cite the late theologian Paul Tillich, who defined religion in the language of German philosophical idealism as "ultimate [i.e., unconditional] concern."[25] Tillich was among those quoted by the Supreme Court in 1965 with reference to "the ever-broadening understanding of the modern religious community," in which religion was described as "a sincere and meaningful belief which occupies in the life of the possessor a place parallel to that filled by [God]..."[26] Earlier in 1961, the court had described Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, and Secular Humanism as "among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God."[27]

The basic question then is whether and how the study of religions in the schools should include both the traditional historic religions and those secular or quasi-religious ideologies "which function as religions, according to the broad definition..."[28] Too narrow a focus may unduly inhibit appreciation for the range and diversity of contemporary religious experience. Too broad a focus may result in a generalized and diffuse conception of religion, void of any distinctive religious content. A practicable solution proposed by two scholars[29] centers in teacher preparation that avoids both religious and secularist bias; emphasizes a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach; and encourages students to reflect on what religion is by examining what the significant religious traditions are and what the relationship is between religion and culture. Students should be able to discriminate between the

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[24] Smith, Brian. Exorcising the Transcendent: Strategies for Defining Hinduism and Religion. In *History of Religions*, Vol. 27, No. 1, August, 1987. p. 32-55.

[25] Cited by Peter Slater in Welch, *Religion in the Undergraduate Curriculum*, p. 28. See also: *Religious Studies in Public Universities*. Editor, McLean, M.D. p. VIII (quoting C.D. Hardy).

[26] Konvitz, Milton R. *Religious Liberty and Conscience*. New York, Viking Press, 1968. p. 93. The background to U.S. v. Seeger is discussed on p. 88-92. See also: Morgan, Richard E. *The Supreme Court and Religion*. New York, Free Press, 1972. p. 167-169.

[27] Konvitz, *Religious Liberty*, p. 56. Background to Torcaso v. Watkins is considered on p. 56-58.

[28] Piediscalzi and Collie, *Teaching About Religion*, p. 21.

[29] Spivey, Robert A., and Rodney F. Allen, cited in Piediscalzi and Collie, *Teaching About Religions*, p. 19.

"narrow" and "broad" definitions and at least appreciate that "religious and non-religious enterprises are distinguishable."[30]

IV. PROBLEMS AND GUIDELINES FOR RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Once certain basic presuppositions have been clarified--the role of pluralism, a practicable and functional definition of religion, and the distinction between teaching about religions and programs of values education or civic religion--proposals for teaching about religions in the public schools may define the specific goals envisioned and guidelines [31] for their effective implementation. Existing curricula provide models and rich experience for accomplishing these goals and avoiding various pitfalls.

Ten suggestions for schools in preparing for religious courses have been proposed by the Panel on Religion in the Curriculum of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.[32]

1. Commitment to a pluralist society and acceptance of religious diversity.

2. Overcoming of teacher anxiety by emphasis on "informed, descriptive, and impartial" treatment of religion.

3. Respect for the inviolate character of children's individual religious beliefs.

4. Honesty in "what, where and when" the school teaches *about* religions.

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[30] Howe, Mark DeWolfe. *The Garden and the Wilderness: Religion and Government in American Constitutional History*. University of Chicago Press, 1965. p. 164.

[31] See Guidelines in: Kniker, Charles R. *Teaching About Religion*. p. 30-31. See also p. 33.

[32] *Religion in the Curriculum*. Alexandria, Virginia, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1987. p. 28-29. See also: Educators Urge Turn to Studies About Religion. *New York Times*, July 2, 1989. p. A16; and Stepp, Laura Sessions. Educators Urge Wider Teaching of Religion. *Washington Post*, July 2, 1987. p. A3.

5. Adequate and objective knowledge by teachers regarding religions and how they function.

6. Support for teachers within the larger community for teaching about religions.

7. Well researched and prepared texts and other teaching materials.

8. Academic programs geared to teachers to help make more effective teaching about religions.

9. Research and development for curriculum models.

10. Care with respect to the rightful role of children's families and religious institutions in their religious and moral education.

Three broadly defined goals cited by Goodlad[33] in his *What Schools Are For?*--enculturation, interpersonal relations, and citizenship--are expanded on with reference to the place of religion in the public school curriculum by Piediscalzi and Collie,[34] who also list five specific goals that center on informing students with a "discerning understanding:"

1. The religious dimension of human life, in its diversity;

2. The ways in which religions function in history and culture;

3. The significance of a religious commitment;

4. The variety of ways in which religions can be studied;

5. The crucial difference between the *practice* of a religion and study *about* it.

These goals, together with a stated commitment to the civic values of liberty in the body politic, can help prevent coercive demands by particular interest groups to control curriculum. Ideally, such common curricula would seek a broad base in the local community, through consultation with advisory boards and study groups representing the full diversity of religious as well as non-religious belief. This would help meet the concerns of those parents who might object in principle to the program.

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[33] See: *Religion in the Curriculum*, p. 31.

[34] Cited in Hunt and Maxson, *Religion and Morality*, p. 280.

Specifically, secondary-school curricula that are related to these goals are described by Collie,[35] and by Sleeper and Spivey for course-models in two-year public colleges.[36] Piediscalzi and Collie provide extended overviews of religion studies in the humanities and the fine arts and in the social studies, as well as particular exemplary courses and units of study in such areas as religion in human culture, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, Christianity, and Science and Religion.[37] The overarching emphasis is on the relationship between religion and culture. Many of these courses reflect the "history of religions" or "science of religion" approach that, beginning in colleges and universities, stresses the comparative study of religions across traditions and cultures.[38]

Ultimately, the criterion for study of religions in the public schools is academic appropriateness, a test that will distinguish what is taught *about* religions from any form of religious instruction, indoctrination or practice. Noting that there sometimes is resistance, active or passive, to the introduction of religious studies into the curriculum, William Collie[39] has identified specific causes for slow acceptance of the idea in the schools: fear of controversy, a sense of inadequacy or uncertainty on the part of teachers, a shortage of available and useful curriculum materials, time limitations of already burdened schedules, and lack of any groundswell of public support for the academic study of religions. All these are related to the perceived need for strong backing and understanding in the community at large. That support appears to be growing.

In 1988 a coalition of 14 religious and educational groups--ranging from American United for Separation of Church and State to the National Association of Evangelicals--endorsed teaching about religions as both constitutional and desirable. The coalition has prepared a brochure, "Religion

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[35] In Hunt and Maxson, *Religion and Morality*, p. 281-283.

[36] Sleeper and Spivey, *The Study of Religion*.

[37] Piediscalzi and Collie, *Teaching About Religion*, Part 4, Exemplary Courses and Units of Study. p. 173-241.

[38] See: *The Study of Religion in Colleges and Universities*. Edited by Paul Ramsey and John Wilson. Princeton University Press, 1979. p. 3-21, 216-280.

[39] Hunt and Maxson, *Religion and Morality*, p. 279. Resistance may also be encountered from those, whether conservative or liberal, who object to any exposure to what they perceive as false religions. Thus, one scholar, distinguishing traditional historic religions as "false belief" from "the truth" of naturalistic "cosmic piety," has urged that the first "not be included in the curriculum." See: Vanderberg, Donald. Education and the Religious. *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 89, No. 1, Fall 1987.

in the Public School Curriculum, Questions and Answers," representing the consensus of a broad range of educational and religious organizations, including many often perceived as liberal or conservative.[40] The coalition hopes to expand the 18 percent of the Nation's 15,300 school systems that now provide courses for study about religions.

Considerable attention has centered on a new school curriculum to be published in 1990, "Living with our Deepest Differences, Religious Liberty in a Pluralistic Society," sponsored by the Williamsburg Charter Foundation and stressing the crucial distinction between pluralism and relativism.[41] Non-partisan and non-sectarian, the Foundation in 1988 issued a Charter on the occasion of the bicentennial celebration of the Federal Constitution, reaffirming the principles of the First Amendment. A one-week curriculum will be ready for trial pilot-programs across the country in 1989-90. The model curriculum will develop courses for 5th, 8th, and 11th grades. To date, California, Georgia, Alaska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Florida, Texas, and Pennsylvania have expressed an active interest in exploring the program. By centering on religious liberty and pluralism the Charter Foundation hopes to foster a commitment to civility in public discourse, grounded in "genuine pluralism," defined as "sustained and disciplined engagement"[42] of authentic differences. Teaching about religions is intended to inform that pluralism with understanding of the religious dimension in American history and culture and in the world community.

V. CONCLUSION

The movement for teaching about religions in the public schools is partly a response to a perceived need for fuller knowledge and greater awareness of religious motivation in our history and culture. But it also is a response to the greatly expanded pluralism of both religious and secular ideologies. American religious pluralism rests upon what some have described as "a

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[40] See: Stepp, Laura Sessions. Coalition Promotes Teaching About Religion in Schools. *Washington Post*, June 1, 1988. p. A1, A9; Witham, Larry. Classroom Religion Wins an Endorsement. *Washington Times*, June 1, 1988. p. A1, A9; and Rachlin, Jill. Putting God on the Reading List. *U.S. News and World Report*, July 4, 1988. p. 57.

[41] See: The Williamsburg Charter-A Symposium. *This World*, No. 24, Winter, 1989. p. 40-101. See also: Group Promotes Study of Religion as a Subject. *New York Times*, October 26, 1988. p. B11; Teaching Religious Toleration. *Washington Post*, October 22, 1988. p. A22; and Marquand, Robert. Schools and the Fourth R. *Christian Science Monitor*, November 14, 1988. p. 25.

[42] Williamsburg Charter--A Symposium, p. 85.

precarious balance" between the extremes of moral indifference and militant sectarianism.[43] The weakening of the older cultural unity has resulted in continuing debate over basic values and moral beliefs. Religion is again in the public eye not only for the communities of faith but in the larger community. Competing religious and secular groups join in seeking a restored public faith in which pluralistic diversity can strengthen religious freedom and the sense of civility.[44]

Just over a century ago one of the most eminent observers of American government, Viscount Bryce, writing on the influence of religion in the United States,[45] stated the case for teaching about religion in American life and history, arguing that:

> ...the Bible and Christian theology altogether have in the past done more in the way of forming the imaginative background to an average American view of the world of man and nature than they have in most European countries.

"It was," he continued,

> religious zeal and the religious conscience which led to the founding of the New England colonies nearly three centuries ago--those colonies whose spirit has in such a large measure passed into the whole nation. Religion and conscience have been a constantly active force in the American commonwealth ever since, not, indeed, strong enough to avert many moral and political evils, yet at the worst times inspiring a minority with a courage and ardor by which moral and political evils have been held at bay, and in the long run generally overcome.

Teaching about religion, in the view of many, can clarify the role of key religious ideas--covenant, freedom of conscience, religious pluralism, religious liberty, and the like--in shaping the American polity, past, present and future. Whether such teaching programs are practicable in the public schools, given the pluralism of American society, is still to be tested.

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[43] Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, p. 226.

[44] See: Riemer, Neal. Religious Liberty and Creative Breakthroughs: The Contributions of Roger Williams and James Madison. In *Religion in American Politics*. Edited by Charles W. Dunn. Washington, Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989. p. 15-23.

[45] Bryce, James. *The American Commonwealth*, New Edition, Vol. II. New York, MacMillan, 1924. p. 793-794.